

History and Survey of the Westminster Confession of Faith

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Part 1: History, Context, and Rationale Class 2: Early Historical Practice in the Church September, 20, 2020

Introduction: Ground rules clearly in view throughout early church history:

The Scriptures are unique

They are 'God-breathed', fully sufficient, and both historical and timeless

They are not given in manual form.

They are subject to various interpretations and emphases
leading to different conclusions

Any/all effort of man in bring out the truth from Scripture:

will be subject to error/subjectivity/bias

will be subject to prejudice (temptation to add or detract)
(cf. Rev. 22:18-19)

will be bound in terms of context

will be required for correct doctrine and govt. within the Church

will be required for precision of belief and accountability of preaching

It is clearly apparent

that the teaching of the Scriptures

call for and instruct the church to raise up and maintain
her leadership and governance

call for the extraordinary offices to be replaced with ordinary ones
to be held and practiced until the end of the age

proper, spiritual authority is to be legitimately handed down
from one generation to the next

proper, spiritual authority is to be placed into the hands
of men chosen by the church along Scriptural guidelines

Immediate Post-Apostolic Era: the Early Church Fathers

Letters of Ignatius (d. 108 AD)

Didache – *The Lord's Teaching Through the Twelve Apostles*

ch. 6 – "Against False Teachers"

ch. 9 – proper observance of the Lord's Supper

ch. 11 – on discerning and receiving proper teachers

The rising threat of false teachers

already happening, known of, and warned against in the NT –
1 Tim. 1:3; 6:2; 2 Pet. 2:1; 1 Jn. 2:18ff; Jude 1:3, etc.)

these early threats came in the form of various Gnostics and, eventually, became to be referred to as “heresies”.
These threats, it was understood, needed to be dealt with seriously.
Tertullian (c. 2nd c. AD) – *On the Prescription of Heretics*
The result: a common basis of faith known as The Rule

...this faith: in one God, the Father Almighty, who made the heaven and the earth and the seas and all the things that are in them; and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, who was made flesh for our salvation; and in the Holy Spirit, who made known through the prophets the plan of salvation, and the coming, and the birth from a virgin, and the passion, and the resurrection from the dead, and the bodily ascension into heaven of the beloved Christ Jesus, our Lord, and his future appearing from heaven in the glory of the Father to sum up all things and to raise anew all flesh of the whole human race... (Irenaeus, Against Heresies)

Earliest emerging summations of the true faith:

The Old Roman Symbol (3rd c.)

*I believe in God the Father almighty;
and in Christ Jesus His only Son, our Lord,
Who was born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
Who under Pontius Pilate was crucified and buried,
on the third day rose again from the dead,
ascended to heaven,
sits at the right hand of the Father,
whence He will come to judge the living and the dead;
and in the Holy Spirit,
the holy Church,
the remission of sins,
the resurrection of the flesh
(the life everlasting).*

Use & practice of such summations in regular church life

Baptism – understanding/reciting the essence of Christian faith
starting off simply (rf. Mt. 28:19)
but soon becoming more critically applied
inquiring process extended to up to a year
a grasp of the summation of doctrine understood
the act of baptizing elaborated

Eucharist – likewise became more & more exclusive, formal and mystical

The emergence of the Apostles' Creed (4th c. AD)

The doctrines in the Apostles' Creed crystallize the essence of Christian truth. The Apostles' Creed dates really from the second century; it took a number of forms in the second century, and finally took the form that we are used to. And there you have the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There you have the incarnation and the atoning death and the triumphant resurrection and forthcoming return of the Lord Jesus. There you have the forgiveness of sins. There you have the reality of the church as the fellowship of those who are born again in Christ. And I think that there could be nothing really healthier in any church than periodically to work over the Apostles' Creed and highlight those doctrines. — Dr. J. I. Packer

“The first reference to it as the Apostles' Creed occurs in a letter from Ambrose of Milan to Rome in 389, a reference that suggests it was clearly of some vintage by that point in time. ... {I}t was finally formalized by the churches of the West under Charlemagne somewhere around 800 AD.”
(C. Trueman)

Next week: “He descended into hell.”